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# Addis Through the Looking-Glass

by Marc Angélil and Cary Siess

*There is the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way.*

*Lewis Carroll (Through the Looking-Glass, first published 1872)*

The dynamic of transactions, hustle and bustle of activities, hodge-podge assortment of goods, colors and smells are all simply breathtaking. Corrugated metal roofs cover stalls piled with diverse products offered for sale: woven baskets, coffee, charcoal, manure, used tires, building materials of every sort, and coffins made of wood. Thousands of people crowd the streets and alleys bartering along the way in the hope of making an unbeatable bargain where possible. As the popular saying goes, “around here one can even bargain for a new soul.”<sup>1</sup>

While the atmosphere exudes an air of exoticism for any outside observer, a closer look at everyday lives of the local population struggling to survive reveals the initial perception as deceptive,

calling into question the allure of the place as seen by foreign eyes – a most curious place it is. Actually, we are in one of the poorest countries of the world, or more precisely in Ethiopia, in the middle of the largest African market, the so-called *Mercato* or *Addis Ketema* district of Addis Ababa. Accustomed to the proverbial good life, we wonder in the face of this alien form of a market economy whether its principles are indeed not more sustainable than those promoted in the West. An unexpected mirror effect comes into play. Whereas the developed world is held up as universal yardstick toward which all developing countries must strive, another standard generates the daily workings of this culture. Were we to look back at the world from the vantage of the *Mercato*, it



would not be from a disposition of envy but rather one of suspicion, for history has already provided a bitter lesson on the consequences of colonization.

The very fact that the name of the market is of Italian origin points to Africa's troubled past when European powers carved the continent into pieces. Although



Ethiopia defiantly asserts never to have been a colony, the country nonetheless was under the rule of Mussolini from 1936 to 1941. During this short phase of Italian occupation, the Fascist regime undertook an ambitious restructuring of the city to give it a new face – a declarative sign of territorial appropriation. Whereas Mussolini’s administration authorized the construction of large public works in the attempt to pacify local resistance, racial separation was enforced as thoroughly as possible.<sup>2</sup> Part of this undertaking entailed a relocation of the indigenous market from the center to the outskirts. As a clear measure of demographic segregation, the new European elite took over the city’s core, with the local people removed and kept at a safe distance. Laid out on a grid, a new neighborhood arose straight from the drawing board, a matrix of sorts to be filled when needed by market stalls, booths, or shops. In keeping with the rules of good planning, public buildings and amenities such as a mosque, a square with a bus station, a city hall, a cinema, a hotel, and a courthouse were envisioned for the community, but only a few were ever realized.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the politically motivated origins of its formation, the Mercato emerged during the following decades as the central platform of the city’s, no less the country’s, commerce. According to official sources, the market today encompasses an area of approximately 500 acres and accommodates roughly 100,000 inhabitants, while its constituent and affiliated activities spread far out into the surrounding districts.<sup>4</sup> Not merely a hub of trade, the quarter serves as a settlement in its own right integrating a multitude of mutually supporting functions; it is a place where goods are sold and produced; it is likewise a place of residence, social



1. Africa as Alice’s looking-glass (original illustration: John Tenniel / montage: Charlotte Malterre-Barthes)  
 2. Aerial view of Mercato district (photograph by Noboru Kawagishi)  
 3. Mercato main street (photograph by Darius Karacsony)

encounter, and religious worship. This programmatic blending is mirrored directly in the structure of the built fabric: market stalls are oriented outward, facing the streets, with workshops and living spaces commonly located at the back – a socio-material diagram reflecting a spontaneous mode of

bottom-up land appropriation. This ostensibly simple spatial scheme is underpinned by a complex social network that ensures the performance of the overall urban system. The collective web is reinforced by craftsmen associations and trade unions housed in low-rise clusters, market





4. Side alley in Mercato district (photograph by Darius Karacsony)  
5. Italian masterplan for Addis Ababa, ca. 1939

halls, or, more recently, two- and three-story buildings. The whole of Mercato is divided into sections according to specific categories of services and products available therein. There is, for example, a sector for spices, another for agricultural produce, still others for light metalwork, textiles, plastics, or imported electronic equipment. Although ordered, the boundaries between these sections are blurred or overlapping specially since this quasi-formal market organization is persistently thrown off balance by informal market practices.

With respect to the coexistence of formal and informal frameworks, the Mercato takes on the role of a key relay between rural and urban communities. It provides an arena for the sale of agricultural produce and serves as a landing pad for ever-increasing hordes of migrant farmers hoping to earn a better living in the city. As the majority of these migrants are not legally registered they stand little chance of getting a commercial license. Their presence and activities are nevertheless tolerated. They occupy temporarily unclaimed

spots wherever possible, peddling their products in the middle of the street if necessary. One encounters here yet another level of land appropriation, only this time in the form of a roaming proprietorship.

Within this setup are to be found, not only people that are on the move but also material resources of the city. Goods no longer used are salvaged and revalued for sale in the market – a type of recycling before the letter, a literal and opportunistic mining of the city that involves reprocessing whatever is at hand. What is typically considered as waste – and thus worthless – in the West, is reappropriated in Addis Ababa through modest means and on-the-spot ingenuity: old tires are converted into sandals and ropes for pack-mules; softdrink bottles are turned into toys; and scrap metal is transformed into household utensils.<sup>5</sup> Other products, from discarded plastic sheets, to recovered copper pipes, reinforcing bars, or beverage crates, need only be cleaned before being recirculated as building materials. When the interplay of supply and demand is constrained

by an economy of scarcity, there is no limit to improvisation and bottom-up resourcing is the rule. When set into motion, such a principle gives rise to a self-fuelling system operating across multiple scales – a trickle-up urban ecology that reframes the discourse on sustainability.

Despite the dire conditions prevalent, such makeshift processing of resources gives rise to a special form of a market economy, namely that of small-scale enterprising of subsistence empowered through the thousandfold repetitions of minute elements, an undertaking carried out by the masses and organized from below. And yet, this frail economy recently faced an existential threat when the livelihood of local stakeholders was directly confronted by the interests of a global consortium seeking a takeover of the quarter. What sparked the crisis was the offer of a Malaysian investment firm to buy all rights for use of the area, with the intention of turning the *Mercato* into a business and shopping district, an infringement from the outside hinting at a new



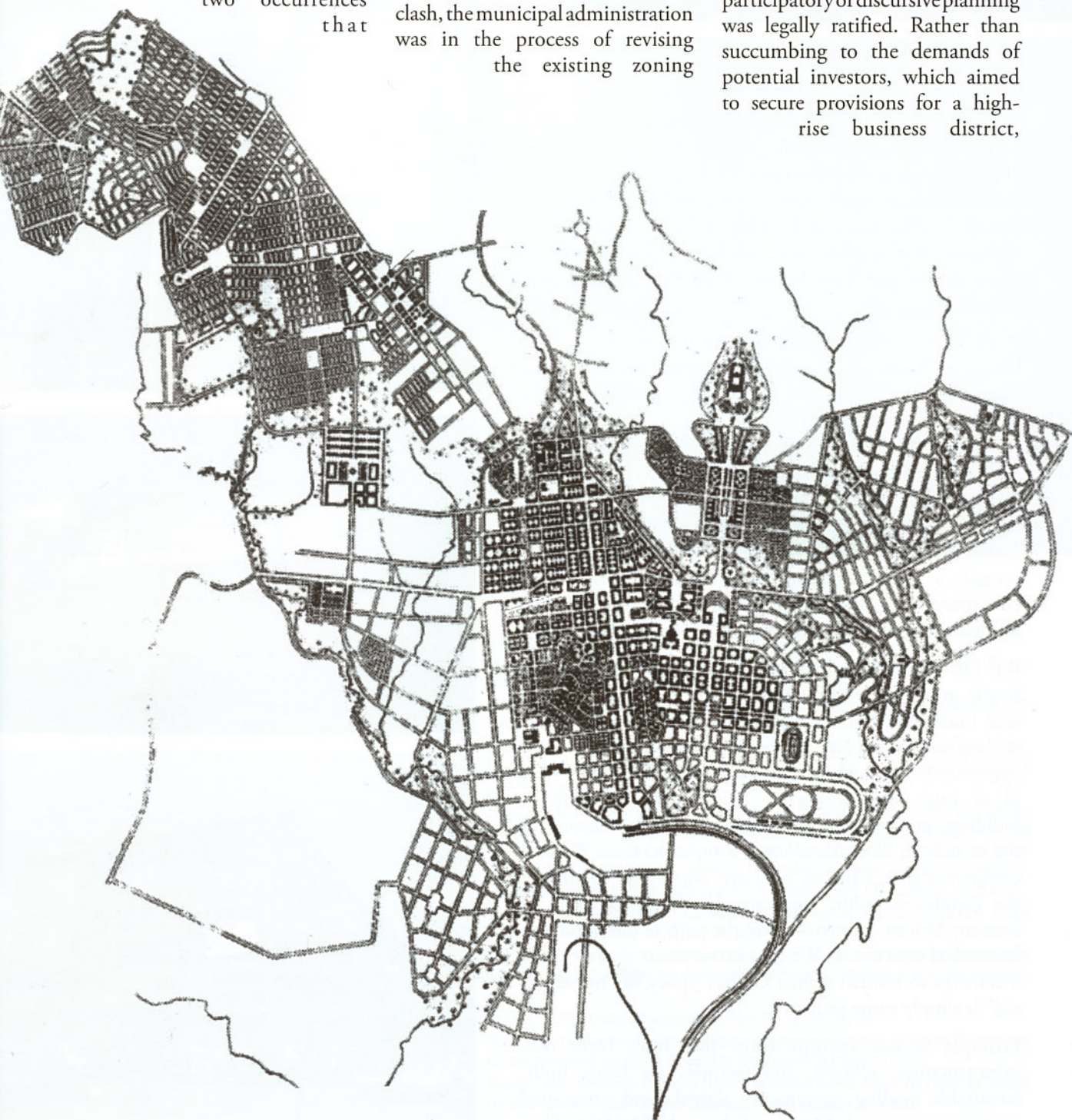
form of domination. Followed scrupulously by the local press, the affair set off a public debate on the future development of the city. While politicians were occupied with the question of whether partaking in the global game would be both desirable and feasible, it was finally the cost of mass relocation that brought the entire venture to a grinding halt.<sup>6</sup>

The debate was accompanied by two occurrences that

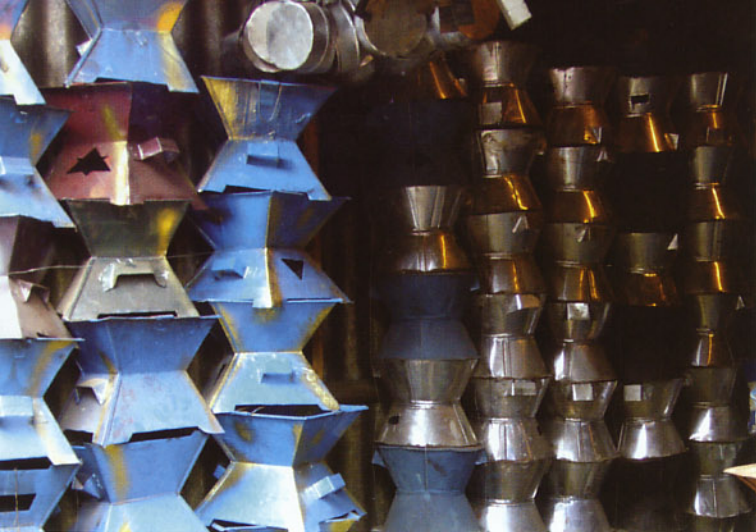
facilitated the resolution of the conflict. First, the standoff reinforced social ties within the community as well as galvanizing its political representation within the city at large; the worker associations were proactive in demanding an equal voice in shaping their environment. New trade unions and building cooperatives were formed that further strengthened communal bonds. Second, at the time of the clash, the municipal administration was in the process of revising the existing zoning

ordinance, the so-called Addis Ababa Development Plan. An entire chapter of building regulations was drafted for the *Mercato* area. To those responsible it became clear that neither planning from the outside nor exclusively from top-down appease stakeholders: their demand to be involved in decision-making processes became paramount.<sup>7</sup>

Thus what is referred to as participatory or discursive planning was legally ratified. Rather than succumbing to the demands of potential investors, which aimed to secure provisions for a high-rise business district,







consultation was sought with citizens through the city government.<sup>8</sup> Self-empowerment in place of dictated power became the maxim for all planning matters. Notable from the perspective of urban discourse is that the mandate in Addis Ababa to move from informal to formal structures is only possible under the condition of dialogue between public interests framed from above and those determined from below by the needs of the local population.

If we were to take another look in the mirror, another image of Africa would surface. Whereas the purported “dark continent” displayed ghostly traits to Michel Leiris in its sheer otherness and invisibility, as the title of his travel log, *Phantom Africa*, from the 1930s suggests, it becomes apparent that what indeed harbours phantomlike features today is that strain of market economy which is engulfing the planet.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on the case of Addis Ababa shows us that what appears to be backward is actually a forward-looking tactic of how to effectively circumvent the dictates of global capital through the implementation of communicative action in planning.

But just as any mirror can be shattered, so too can this fragile grassroots vision. A new form of colonization is well underway. For now, China, having spied lucrative trading prospects, has stepped through the window of opportunity opened up by Africa. Putting the West ill at ease, an unexpected Sino-African dynamic is building, evoking memories of the European seizure of the continent. Notwithstanding complaints from Western companies that Chinese bids are impossible to match, the People’s Republic has learned to play the game of coaxing African countries along the path of development. In marked contrast to Western investments that tie trade incentives to human rights, China’s policy of “no-strings aid” is simply more seductive.

Ethiopia is not exempt from this lure. Here new infrastructures, schools, and factories are being built, favourable trading agreements signed, and vocational programs sponsored. On top of this, a USD 150 million





7. Mercato District, Figur-Ground Plan, Addis Ababa 2008
8. Kitchen utensils made from recycled scrap metal (photograph by Theano Mazarakis)
9. Recycled metal drums for coffee filters (photograph Noboru Kawagishi)
10. Ship containers integrated in building façade (photograph by Lukas Kueng)
11. New workers' cooperative in Mercato district (photograph by Kathrin Gimmel)
12. Proposed Chinese infrastructure project for "Confusion Square," Addis Ababa
13. Chinese gift to the African Union, Addis Ababa

gift was recently given by China for an annex to the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. But all of this comes at a price: substandard wages; no retirement benefits; no custom revenue from imports; no income due to tax-free accords; and, above all, a general disregard for the rights of citizens. Those browsing through the Mercato today would not be surprised to discover artifacts bearing the ubiquitous label "Made in China." In effect, exploitation is the name of the game.

"Let's pretend" that we in the West are out in front, looking back at the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup> But a second glance in the rearview mirror, however, reveals another player set to overtake all in the fast lane. One might well recall that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. ■



## About the Authors

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## Notes

- 1 Katrin Hildemann and Martin Fitzenreiter, *Äthiopien* (Bielefeld: Peter Rump Publishers 1999), p. 199.
- 2 Thomas P. Ofcansky and Laverle Berry, Ethiopia. A Country Study (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 158-60.
- 3 Heyaw Terefe, Contested Space. *Transformation of Inner-city Market Areas and User's Reaction in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology 2005), p. 126.
- 4 "Mercato Local Development Plan," *Addis Ababa Development Plan* (Addis Ababa: City Planning Commission 2002), p. 73. Another source indicates that "some 200,000 people live and work" in the Mercato district. See Thomas Vesper, "Masterplan for the Mercato," *Akzente. Urban Management* (Eschborn, Germany: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, GTZ, 2005), pp. 14-17.
- 5 Lukas Küng and Dirk Hebel, "Lernen von Addis Abeba," *archithese* (Zurich: Niggli Publishers March/April 2007), pp. 26 and 31.
- 6 The authors were informed of the unfolding of events in a series of discussions with representatives from the *Association of Ethiopian Architects* in Addis Ababa in May 2007.
- 7 Op. cit., *Addis Ababa Development Plan*, pp. 5, 43, 73, 74.
- 8 See Jürgen Habermas's thesis pertaining to communicative action in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Publishers 1981).
- 9 Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), in *Michel Leiris. Miroir de l'Afrique*, edited by Jean Jamin (Paris: Quarto Gallimard 1996), pp. 851 and 855.
- 10 Op. cit., Lewis Carroll, p. 124.